

Tales from A Thousand and One Nights?

New stories for Early Childhood Education and Care

In this overview of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ireland, Mathias Urban assesses the recent developments in the sector, including a new funding model and workforce plan from government. The article shows the problems with framing ECEC as a low-skilled 'service' sector or 'industry', warns against relying on corporate provision, and calls for an autonomous professional body for the sector and a Minister for ECEC.



Mathias Urban
Desmond Chair of Early
Childhood Education,
Early Childhood
Research Centre, Dublin
City University

The stories we tell

Drafting this overview of developments and critical events in Irish early childhood education and care (ECEC) on a night flight from Uzbekistan back to Ireland, I might be forgiven for my choice of title. And what better place to think about the stories we tell ourselves about the system and its condition than a 21st-century magic carpet flying high over Samarkand, the ancient city on the Silk Road?

Stories matter in early childhood education, and so does place. Samarkand is where the tales from *A Thousand and One Nights* originate. They were first told, the story goes, by Princess Shahrazad to Shahryar, the king of kings, to delay an undesirable turn of events, namely her own demise. A thousand years later, in 2022, Tashkent in Uzbekistan was host to the UNESCO World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education – a place for the world to come together to create new stories about the future of early childhood education at a critical crossroad for humanity (UNESCO, 2022). The stories we tell ourselves in Ireland, and the storybook we contribute to at global events like the UNESCO conference, both matter: they frame how we make sense of the world, and of the place we occupy in it as early childhood educators, scholars, and advocates.

In previous contributions to *Ireland's Education Yearbook* (Urban, 2020, 2022b) I highlighted the persistent systemic challenges facing Irish ECEC, and the measures taken by key actors (government, unions, sector organisations) to mitigate them. The challenges are well documented by internal and external observers. For decades they have revolved around three key factors: *governance*, *resourcing*, and *professionalisation* of the system. As I reported last year, each has been at the centre of recent initiatives:

- an internal review of the government's *operational model*, distributed as it is between an array of departments and agencies, and the creation of Childcare Ireland as a one-stop shop (announced but not yet realised)
- a new funding model that introduces *core funding* as a step towards supply-side funding for early childhood services (DCEDIY, 2021b)
- a framework policy mapping out pathways to professionalisation for the entire early childhood workforce, including the sizable childminding sector (DCEDIY, 2021a).

I read these policy initiatives as a welcome step towards acknowledging that not all is well in Irish early childhood education and care. Policy is reacting to the multiple and persistent crises of an unsustainable ECEC system. As such, the bundle of policy initiatives must be welcomed as a serious attempt to improve the situation. Of the critical developments in the ECEC landscape, two stand out as particularly important.

The bare minimum?

First is the introduction of an Employment Regulation Order (ERO), or, to use its full title, 'An Order establishing statutory minimum remuneration and conditions of employment for certain grades in the early years' service industry' (DETE, 2022). This has been hailed as a substantial achievement because for the first time the ERO sets minimum wages for early childhood educators, which has been a long-standing demand by trade unions and early childhood professionals.

The ERO is the result of a negotiated agreement of a Joint Labour Committee (JLC) established by the Minister of State for Business, Employment and Retail, Damien English TD, in summer 2021. The point of a JLC is that it provides a legal forum for employers and worker representatives of a given 'employment sector' to come together 'in equal numbers' to 'discuss and agree proposals for terms and conditions to apply to specified grades or categories of workers in the sector concerned' (DETE, 2021).

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Clearly, a set minimum wage for early childhood educators should be celebrated. Or should it? To begin with, the hourly rates agreed by the JLC and enshrined in the ERO are low. They range from €13 (€9 for under-18s!) to €17.25 depending on qualification and role (Workplace Relations Commission, 2022). Those rates are a fraction of the hourly rates of primary school teachers with a similar qualification level (€35.21 for new entrants). Proponents of the arrangement might argue that the ERO establishes, for the first time, a legal base, a bottom line, from which future increases can and will be negotiated in an established industrial-relations process. Surely, considering where we came from, the prospect of incremental change must be seen as progress?

Allow me to offer some critical observations. What exactly is the story that the ERO tells about early childhood education and care in Ireland? By

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subscribing to it, what story are we telling ourselves about who we are, as educators and, collectively, as the ECEC profession? On its website, the Workplace Relations Commission offers helpful insights: it confirms the principal purpose of an ERO, which is to fix ‘minimum rates of pay and conditions of employment for workers in specified business sectors’. The sector to which the ERO applies is the ‘Early Learning and Childcare Sector’. Leaving aside the continued use of the term ELC (rightly resisted as an inappropriate imposition by many early childhood educators), the ERO defines ECEC as a ‘business sector’. This is in line with similar terminology used by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment on its website. There, ECEC is referred to as the ‘Early Years Service Sector’. Not only does this add to the terminological confusion, it confirms a mindset: what early childhood educators do is provide a *service* within the frame of a *business sector*. It is revealing to read what sectors are subject to EROs. There are only three: Contract Cleaning, Security Industry, and Early Learning and Childcare Services.

Well-functioning (‘industrial’) relations between employers and employees are critical for any profession, and I would strongly encourage every early childhood educator to join a union. Having said that, I am concerned that what is at play here is a dangerous and counterproductive strategy that should be met with collective resistance and alternative proposals:

- The ERO confirms the view that ECEC is a ‘service’, to be provided in a ‘business’ model.
- It reaffirms the value placed on ECEC by grouping it with other low-wage, low-skill occupations, none of which are graduate-led.

Commenting on the establishment of the JLC in 2021, Early Childhood Ireland notes that *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families* (DCYA, 2018) introduces a more ambitious view of the future of the ECEC profession:

This is essential as there is widely accepted evidence of the link between qualifications of childcare staff and quality of provision. The previous government accepted this evidence, and through the First 5, committed to measures that would bring early years education more in line with primary level education in pay, working conditions and qualifications. This commitment is also noteworthy because the only currently active JLCs are in three sectors: contract cleaning; hairdressing and security, none of which is graduate led. It seems reasonable to point out that educators in childcare settings are more similar to teachers, for whom an ERO would not be deemed either appropriate or acceptable. (Early Childhood Ireland, 2021)

I agree with the concern expressed by Early Childhood Ireland. While the ERO might have a role to play in securing the bare minimum in remuneration, it certainly is not a helpful strategy to achieve professional recognition. Such recognition cannot be achieved by trade unions; it is not their role. The ELO process and its outcome highlight a persistent weakness of the

Irish ECEC landscape: the *workforce* consists of nearly 30,000 professionals, with the glaring absence of a (self-)organised, collective profession. I have argued before for the critical importance of a 'profession that thinks and speaks for itself' (Urban & Dalli, 2012) and can only reiterate the call for an autonomous professional body.

Alarming, too, is the persistent framing of ECEC as *service*, as *business*, and collectively as an *industry*. Missing from the picture is the critical role of realising *every child's right to education and care, from birth*.

Both developments – the framing as a low-skilled 'service' sector, and the persistent omission of the educational function of ECEC in the political and public debate – point to a larger problem: the apparent inability to imagine a radical change in how we, Irish society, take shared responsibility for realising the rights of all young children.

Nourishing care?

A second development in the ECEC landscape in 2022 adds to the picture. Announced in November 2022, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) will run a pilot scheme that enables ECEC settings to provide food for children ('a range of meal options including the provision of hot meals'). €150,000 Dormant Accounts Funding has been set aside for the project (DCEDIY, 2022a). This clearly is a welcome and much-needed initiative. It recognises that food poverty and malnutrition are an increasingly common experience for young children in affluent societies like Ireland.¹ However, the pilot is embedded in the announcement made in the 2020 Programme for Government to develop a

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DEIS-type model for early learning and childcare, which aims to provide services with a proportionate mix of universal and targeted supports to support children and families accessing their services who are experiencing disadvantage. (Government of Ireland, 2020)

While targeted supports for disadvantaged and marginalised children are necessary, there appears to be a lack of imagination, political will, and strategy to move to a fully universal and rights-based model of early childhood education and care.

What other stories should we be telling?

The examples above add to the story – the overall narrative – of an ECEC environment that is moving towards the ambition laid out in *First 5* to develop an 'effective' system of supports for all young children in Ireland. Missing elements that are critical for the functioning of ECEC as a system (competent, effective. . .) are being put in place. It is a story of

slow, incremental development, but of movement in the right direction nonetheless. Inevitably, there are some embedded sub-plots, stories within stories, that disrupt the main narrative. Examples include the story of opposition to core funding, the story of reluctance among childminders to engage with the system, the story of poor communication of policy intentions and directions.

But the general picture is one of overdue, largely welcome, and positive developments. Let us acknowledge this for a moment. Then, let us turn to the stories we choose not to tell (ourselves and the world), and ask why that might be the case. This should provide possibilities for opening space for change. It will offer an opportunity to (re)connect Irish ECEC with the wider context of the world around us – the local with the global. I call them the stories of purpose.

The story of the market

“ **Early childhood education and care in Ireland relies heavily on private enterprise, as does education in general.** ”

The first of these is the story of the market. Early childhood education and care in Ireland relies heavily on private enterprise, as does education in general (Skerritt & Salokangas, 2020). With calls for a shift towards a public system, and de facto nationalisation during the Covid-19 pandemic, the debate tends to get stuck in a false dichotomy between private and public. As usual, things are more complex.

Private, in the Irish ECEC environment, is a broad term that covers very different types of arrangements and business models. Outside of the small but vibrant community and voluntary sector, most early childhood services are privately owned and run. This provides Ireland with a landscape of small services that are close to the families they serve, and have a stake in the community they are situated in. I see this as a strength and something we should value going forward. These services operate as businesses because that has traditionally been the only frame of reference. Increasingly, these services struggle with a burden of bureaucracy, administration, and accountability (e.g., inspections) – inevitable consequences of a more regulated system. Despite (or, some would argue, because of) new funding mechanisms, many of them also face challenges in their economic viability.

On the other end of the spectrum are large providers ('chains') that often operate in a global 'market', are controlled by international private equity, and are answerable to their shareholders. The purpose of these corporate 'childcare' providers is not primarily to serve a community but to return a profit. In a political climate of government commitment to increased funding, these corporations are finding the 'childcare' market irresistibly profitable. In 2020, for instance, Busy Bees, a UK-registered globally operating company that owns the Irish chain Giraffe, reported a 'profit margin of 31.5%, up from 26.3%' on its global operations. This is due not least to 'government support received during the year and close control of costs.'² There are several alarming aspects to this story of a successful business:

- First, corporate providers find it highly profitable to operate in an environment that continues to be chronically underfunded (according to government acknowledgement).
- Second, the 'profit' being made here is not a business surplus, to be reinvested in staff, premises, or quality for children. It is public money that is extracted from the Irish ECEC system and channelled to the company's shareholders.
- Third, the business model of Busy Bees (and similar globally operating corporations) rests on acquisitions – the buyout of existing services.

What are the implications for the future of Irish ECEC? My concern, shared by global analysts, is that Ireland is sleepwalking into dependency on corporate, private for-profit providers. Their presence in the Irish 'market' is limited for now, but the situation is changing. We will see an acceleration of buyouts of small services. This is one of the unintended consequences as small owner-operators look to exit an environment they find increasingly onerous.

Here, our Irish story connects with a wider global tale. Where we are now, others have been before. Countries like Australia, New Zealand, and, closer to home, Belgium have allowed the corporate takeover of ECEC before. Educators, children, families, and the public are now paying the price. The fallout of the collapse of the Australian ABC Learning in 2008 due to financial mismanagement is well documented (for an early analysis see Press & Woodrow, 2009). Aotearoa/New Zealand once had an early childhood landscape similar to ours: diverse, small-scale, a mix of community and private. Today more than half of all ECEC places in the country are provided by corporate for-profit chains. They extract public funding and exert pressure on government to lower quality standards and working conditions (Mitchell, 2002; Neuwelt-Kearns & Ritchie, 2020). Very recently, in Belgium, the NeoKids chain of nurseries filed for bankruptcy, leaving 400 families in Brussels high and dry, and leaving the State to pick up the pieces (Lyons, 2022).

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At the moment it appears the Irish government has no strategy (no intention?) to counter predictable similar developments here. On the contrary, policy commitments to a 'fully publicly funded' ECEC system are a guarantee to underwrite corporate profits with public funds indefinitely. What is to be done? We need political leadership to initiate an informed debate about the difference between a 'publicly funded' system (which is what we have), and a universal, public, rights-based system of early childhood education and care. Necessary debate should be complemented by immediate measures:

- a public scheme to buy out any ECEC service looking to 'exit the market'³
- the announcement of a five-year transition to universal, public, rights-based ECEC, embedded in wider, integrated policies for children and families (see the 'story of survival' below)

- the phasing-out of any extraction of profits (non-reinvested surplus) from publicly funded services, over a five-year period, beginning now.

The story of the right to education

Just like the tales of *A Thousand and One Nights*, the yet-untold stories of Irish early childhood education connect; they are embedded in each other. Once we agree to un-write and rewrite the story of the 'market', we can begin to imagine alternative stories of purpose. A critical one, I suggest, is the story of the right to education. Internationally, Ireland is not alone with its persistent split between 'childcare' and 'early education'. It is one of the few countries, though, that have dropped the concept of education from the nomenclature.

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A short reminder: (*Early Learning* is what every child does, all the time, from birth. Learning is a fundamental feature of human nature. *Education* is the purposeful interaction between adult and child, where learning unfolds in a relationship. It requires qualified educators. *Care*, too, is an essential feature of what makes us human. At its best, it is woven into any human interaction, regardless of the circumstances. Unfortunately, in our modern societies *care* has become a technical term for meeting people's basic (often physical) needs: to make sure they are safe, fed, and

clean. This is not, I am aware, how most early childhood educators would describe their practice with children, yet it is a persistent image in our collective mind.

Removing *education* from the naming of the field leaves practitioners with *care* (in its diminished technical reading) as their main task. This feeds into the story of early childhood settings as a service industry, aptly placed together with cleaning and security: the story where the bare minimum is all we deserve. The elimination of *education* also feeds into the story of the market, where businesses are best placed to provide *care* as a service at the lowest possible cost.

Can we come together to imagine a different story? A story that evolves from the fundamental right to education for every child, from birth? 'Education', writes Siegfried Bernfeld (1925, 1973), is 'the sum total of the social reaction to the fact of ontogenetic postnatal development'. Educators, I add, are the mediators of the process, and therefore connected in their educational practice to both the child and society. To be an educator is to be a political and cultural professional (Freire, 1998). Reclaiming *education* as the central task of early childhood professionals challenges us to engage in public and political debate about how we, as a society, understand what education is for – its purpose – especially in relation to the youngest children.

This engagement becomes ever more important as the right to education from birth is acknowledged in global discourses and agreements: the World Declaration on Education for All (Jomtien Declaration), the World Education Forum (Dakar), and most recently the Tashkent Declaration

and Commitments to Action for Transforming Early Childhood Care and Education (UNESCO, November 2022). At global level, too, the story of the right to education, from birth, connects to the story of the market. The Tashkent Declaration makes reference to another important international agreement: the Abidjan Principles, adopted in 2019, state as their 'overarching principle' that

States must provide free, public education of the highest attainable quality to everyone within their jurisdiction as effectively and expeditiously as possible, to the maximum of their available resources. (Abidjan Principles, 2019; see also Adamson et al., 2021)

As early childhood educators in a globally connected world, we should claim these principles for Ireland. The 'market' cannot realise the right to free, public education. As Koumbou Boly Barry, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education, observes:

Without a rights-based framework, the financing, organization and provision of ECCE have been predominantly taken up by the private sector. (United Nations, 2022)

The story of survival

Finally, the story I suggest we should urgently begin to imagine might be called the tale of survival. It tells a complex, conflicted, but ultimately beautiful story about children and childhood in a difficult world. In Ireland, like in most European countries, we spend much time looking inward. Working hard to figure out the relationship between care and education, for instance, to arrive at the conclusion that the two are inseparable (hence *Early Childhood Education and Care*). However, it is increasingly evident that the story of ECEC must be embedded in a wider context – in the interest of children and for us, as a profession, to develop in a meaningful way.

The story begins with the realisation (far from surprising) that children are whole human beings from birth. What is puzzling, though, is that when it comes to early childhood services, we treat them as fragmented beings. To be cared for in one setting, educated in another, their health needs looked after by one profession (their nutrition needs often neglected), their rights to housing and shelter dealt with (or not) by yet another department – the list goes on. With its fragmented and dysfunctional ECEC system, Ireland has been catching up with international developments for some time, and much remains to be done.

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Ireland has, however joined a global consensus about the right to holistic services for young children. The 2018 strategy *First 5* outlines a vision of a 'whole-of-government approach' to realising young children's rights. It is in line with what I call a global 'systemic turn' (Urban, 2022a; Urban & Guevara, 2019): the acknowledgment by governments and international agencies that

services for young children are more effective where they are integrated to provide health, nutrition, well-being, care, and education, together with supports for parents.

A good example of the positive impact of such integrated services were the Sure Start Children's Centres in the UK (wilfully destroyed by successive Conservative governments). There are other examples from different global regions (Vargas-Barón et al., 2022). We know now that the success (or otherwise) of integrated services rests on how well they are embedded in multisectoral policy frameworks that bring together health, education, welfare, housing, labour, urban planning, and other policy areas.

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At European Union level, the EU Child Guarantee is a first attempt to consolidate policy areas; it requires member states to develop their own action plans. Ireland's EU Child Guarantee National Action Plan was published in summer 2022 (DCEDIY, 2022b). While welcome, the plan is unambitious on early childhood education and care: it mainly lists existing policies. I believe it will be necessary for us, collectively, to take ownership of the policy and inscribe ourselves more assertively into the national action plan.

Where to from here?

As we move into another electoral cycle, I suggest we seize the opportunity to explore, map out, and specify policy choices and actions for the future of universal, rights-based, public ECEC, embedded in wider, systemic, multisectoral policies for young children. This is a call to debate, but let me offer some suggestions:

Let us not give in to POSIWID

Cyberneticist Stafford Beer (1926–2002) observed that quite often the de facto workings of a system are at odds with its official purpose. In his own words: 'there is no point in claiming that the purpose of a system is to do what it constantly fails to do'. Hence his dictum *the purpose of a system is what it does* (POSIWID). We must continue to work (argue, struggle) for a system that does what it is supposed to do: provide universal, free, rights-based public early childhood education and care for all.

Let us resist the market

Ireland has ambitious policies for young children (though they could be more ambitious). The idea that those policies, and the rights of children, families, and educators, could be realised by private for-profit enterprise is a fantasy. We need to enshrine the transition to a public system into parties' election manifestos.

Let us insist on a truly effective system

Fragmented governance remains one of the central problems for Irish ECEC. We should revisit the long-standing recommendation (by OECD and others) that all responsibility for ECEC should come under the auspices of one government department. There is currently no Minister for Early Childhood Education and Care, an absence that contributes to the lack of political leadership in relation to the field. Where should the Minister for ECEC be placed? Other countries situate ECEC in the Ministry for Education. That would be in line with the growing acknowledgement of the crucial educational function of ECEC (which extends beyond the limited remit of the ECCE 'free' preschool scheme).

It would require, however, a much broader debate about education (and the difference between education and schooling). Not an easy task in a country that so far has not achieved a public education system. The obvious alternative would be to strengthen the position of ECEC with the Department of Children. By that I mean *not* a further expansion of the departmental administration, but political leadership – the establishment of a Minister for ECEC.

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ENDNOTES

1. For example, the 2022 Global Nutrition Report states: 'The United Kingdom is "off course" to meet all targets for maternal, infant and young child nutrition' (<https://globalnutritionreport.org/>). CSO data for Ireland show that in 2018, 8.7% of the population in the eastern and midlands region suffered 'moderate or severe food insecurity'. Disaggregated data, such as on the prevalence of stunting in young children, are outdated (www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-sdg2/irelandsunsdgs2019-reportonindicatorsforgoal2zerohunger/hunger/).
2. Figures provided by the Centre for International Corporate Tax Accountability and Research (<https://cictar.org/>). Giraffe's parent company, Busy Bees, is majority-owned by a giant Canadian public pension fund, the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan (OTPP), and minority-owned (28%) by Temasak, a sovereign wealth fund of the Singapore government. See also Simon et al., 2022.
3. I am aware this will be a complex task, as it involves private property, mortgages, pensions, etc. However, I am confident that issues can be worked out provided there is political will.

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(Cyberneticist Stafford Beer 1926–2002).

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